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School Quality:
Parent Perspectives and Schooling Choices

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Abstract

In this chapter, I draw on interviews with parents living in three lower income communities in Delhi to explore parental conceptions of school quality and to examine the role of both quality and non-quality factors in shaping schooling decisions. The analysis suggests that notions of quality are socially situated, while constraints to realising quality preferences in practice illuminate how choice-as-policy may further entrench social inequalities rather than delivering improved access to quality education to all.

Keywords: school quality, parents, school choice

1. Introduction

The fostering of parental school choice is one aspect of what the editors of this volume identify as the new discursive regime that has come to shape educational ideas in India in recent decades. Predicated on assumptions of greater efficiency, accountability and equity via increased competition between schools, consumer 'choice' has taken on new significance as a mechanism to ensure quality education. However, policy discourse that frames parents as consumers who work to make the 'best' choices for their children often fails to consider varying parental definitions of school and educational quality.

Equally, for most parents, quality preferences are only part of the story with respect to school quality and schooling decisions. For example, financial constraints to school access and school-level bureaucracy may impede parents' ability to enact their choice of school in practice (Srivastava and Noronha 2016). Parents' ability to exercise either 'exit' or 'voice' in response to school quality failings is also not straightforward (Srivastava 2007; James and Woodhead 2014). As such, how parents make sense of

constraints that impede their ability to access quality education for their children is relevant to understanding the relationship between school choice and quality.

Empirical studies of school choice in India are few in comparison to those in developed countries and have tended to focus on choice outcomes (most particularly the choice of private schooling) rather than choice processes.[1] However, in-depth accounts of how parents understand differences between schools and how in turn this influences their schooling decisions are significant to an understanding of broader issues of educational quality and purpose. In this chapter, I draw on data from interviews with parents living in three lower income communities in Delhi to examine both their conceptions of school quality and how non-quality factors intertwine with such conceptions to produce eventual schooling decisions. The analysis suggests that parents' quality perceptions are influenced by different educational and non-educational aims, informal information networks and the sociocultural contexts of choice-making. The distinction between quality preferences and choice outcomes also illuminates the significance of different forms of capital (economic, social and cultural) for parents when they seek access to quality education.

2. Methods

This chapter draws on data collected for my doctoral study of how the education market in India works at the micro level, with a focus on how low income households navigate the decision-making process for elementary education.[2] Forming the heart of the wider study, data presented here are drawn from 58 semi-structured interviews with parents

from across three slum squatter sites (*jhuggi jhopri* clusters) in south and east Delhi that took place between September 2014 and March 2015.

The two main case study sites (Locations A and B) in south Delhi were selected based on: 1) researcher knowledge of the areas; 2) the concentration of lower income families residing in each locality; and 3) the range of schools and school types within the immediate vicinity (within a 1 km radius of each community). Across the two study sites, schools with an elementary section included government schools managed by the South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) and the Delhi Directorate of Education, private aided schools, and several private institutions that varied by cost and recognition status. Reflecting the diversity of institutions captured by the empirical study detailed in Chapter 9 of this volume, schools were also found to differ by medium of instruction, coeducational versus single sex status and religious affiliation.[3]

A small number of parents were interviewed from the third site (Location C) in east Delhi. This site was selected for its higher proportion of Muslim households in comparison to Locations A and B. Lower income Muslims are known to experience inequalities of access to education (Government of India 2006; Sarangapani and Winch 2010). In addition, as with Locations A and B, the local education market in Location C included a range of government and private institutions.

Table 11.1 Number of parent interviewees by location

Interviewees	Case study site			Total
	A	B	C	
Mother	13	15	3	31
Father	2	12	2	16
Other family member (main caregiver)	2	0	1	3

Joint (parents)	2	2	2	6
Joint (parent with another family member)	1	1	0	2
Total	20	30	8	58

Source: Author's data.

Parents living in each selected community with children of elementary school age (ages 6 to 14) or with children currently accessing elementary schooling, were eligible to take part in the study. In part because of the study focus on the local contexts of choice-making, recruitment was conducted at the community level. The recruitment strategy initially involved approaching people in public areas of the community (the main walkways, outside shops, or areas where a few people were sitting), explaining who I was, what the study was about and asking if they would be willing to be interviewed. From an early stage, I found that my obvious outsider status (I am a white, British woman) had an unexpected benefit: people were naturally curious about who I was and why I was there, so often approached me directly. This gave me a much-needed 'in' to starting initial conversations; in time, contacts with other potential participants developed through snowballing.

Interviews took place at interviewees' homes or within the local area at a place of the interviewee's choosing and lasted an average of 45 minutes. Most interviews were conducted in Hindi,[4] with the support of research assistants, who also assisted with the interview transcription and translation. Using an interview schedule as a guide to allow topical trajectories to be followed when appropriate, parents were asked about the schooling and other education services they were accessing for their children (if any) and their reasons for these choices. This included questions concerning parents' opinions about the characteristics of a 'good' school and what they saw as the wider purpose(s) of

education. In general terms, parents who agreed to be interviewed were open to discussing their children's schooling and the factors that they perceived as having shaped their decisions in this respect. Some parents did show some hesitation in sharing their opinions with respect to school quality, questioning whether they could judge this given their own relative lack of formal education. While this is an interesting finding in and of itself, most parents did express more detailed views as interviews continued, possibly as they became more relaxed or because of lines of questioning that helped parents to express their ideas and experiences in more detail.

3 Findings and analysis

3.1 Aims and outcomes

As Winch notes in Chapter 2 of this volume, to understand how education quality may be defined and assessed by parents, it is necessary to consider the aims of parents in seeking education for their children. Parents discussed various motivations for enrolling their children in school that encompassed both educational and non-educational objectives.

In terms of educational aims, outcomes with a social good orientation, such as being able to 'help others' and being a good citizen, were mentioned by a small number of parents in interviews. However, specific skills such as literacy and numeracy were the most common aspects that parents hoped their child would acquire through schooling. For some parents, this was related to relatively everyday activities, such as being able to read bus numbers and to complete forms. For others, as existing studies of schooling in India have identified (Chopra 2005; Srivastava 2006), the perceived value of at least a

basic level of education in the marriage market was a key driver behind the decision to enrol their daughters in school:

> In this community, it is better that a girl is educated. Everybody wants an educated girl these days.

(Ganika, mother of seven, ages 6 to 21; government schools)[5]

Interview, 18 December 2014, Location C

In addition, English and, to a lesser extent, computer skills were key educational outcomes that several parents understood as conferring advantages within the competitive employment market and which largely, although not exclusively, were meant for boys. For example:

> When he [her son] grows up, I understand that if he studies in an English medium school, it would be easier for him to have a job […] We are sending him to an English medium school so that he is able to compare better in the future.
>
> (Aishi, mother of two, ages 9 and 18; private school and government school)[6]
>
> Interview, 10 December 2014, Location B

Whilst the empirical evidence is limited, men in India with minimal English language skills have been identified as earning an hourly wage up to 13% higher than their non-English speaking counterparts (Azam, Chin and Prakash 2011). Thus, whilst the desire for English reflected broader social aspirations than may be captured by reference to the

labour market alone, parents' focus on English medium schooling could be understood as a strategic decision in view of the potential for relative financial gains.

Equally, the findings suggest that the association between English medium schooling and social privilege, the historical context of which Jain outlines in Chapter 1, enhanced the desirability of English for some parents in meaningful ways. For example, one mother, Garima, noted what she perceived as the social value of English within the wider society:

> These days, nothing else matters but the knowledge of English; you only have to speak in English and people think nothing else matters, no other knowledge […] English is required everywhere; who speaks in Hindi these days?

(Garima, mother of one son, age 8; private school)
Interview, 15 February 2015, Location B

Given that neither Garima nor many other local residents spoke English, Garima's question of 'who speaks in Hindi these days' is revealing in the implication that it is not herself or her immediate acquaintances to whom she refers. This indicates the strategic nature of Garima's choice of English medium schooling for her son in seeking to build the right kind of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1977) that will provide access to a different social stratum than the one the family currently occupies. The attentiveness to indicators of social privilege, in this case English, also draws attention to the role of non-educational aims in shaping parents' schooling choices, an issue to which I return later in this chapter.

3.2 School quality indicators

The knowledge of English as a key educational outcome, associated with both employability and social prestige, was found to shape parental schooling choices and quality perceptions across all study sites. Indeed, parents almost always referenced English in response to questions about 'good' schooling, with English operating in effect as a proxy quality indicator. For example:

> [Name redacted] is a good school; its medium of teaching is English.
>
> (Janvi, mother of two, ages 2 and 8; government school)
>
> Interview, 28 November 2014, Location A

> *[RA: [Eleanor] wants to know what you liked about the school when you saw it for the first time?]*
>
> First of all, we liked that not only the teachers of the school but even the students were speaking in English. So, we thought everyone here, including the teachers, are talking in English which doesn't happen in other schools. We thought it would be good for our child.
>
> (Varshil, father of two, ages 3 and 6; private school)
>
> Interview, 18 February 2015, Location C

At the same time, it is important to note the close association between English and private schooling, which was promoted by private schools across all study sites. The majority of private schools in each area advertised themselves as 'English-medium' explicitly on school signs or suggested this by using English for notices and in reception areas. However, while parents may associate English with private schooling, the extent to which

this may be borne out in practice is not always clear (Majumdar and Mooij 2011). School visits and informal conversations with teachers during fieldwork revealed that English was not a functional language within some schools at the lower end of the fee spectrum.

Despite this, parents continued to associate private schools with English, whilst government schools as a broad category attracted criticism from parents for failing to teach English effectively:

> [Good education] means the skills that one should have after passing [Class] XII, the skills or ability that a new job seeker must have. The command over English language that one should have is not there in someone passing out from a government school.
>
> (Rakesh, uncle of three, ages 11 to 15; private schools)
>
> Interview, 15 January 2015, Location B

Parents also made broader criticisms of government schools, pointing to what some felt was widespread failure within the government system. For example, several parents asserted that there was a complete absence of any teaching and learning in government schools:

> The teachers do not turn up; the kids do not study. They do not teach anything in these government schools.
>
> (Sai, father of two, ages 5 and 11; private and private aided schools)
>
> Interview, 12 February 2015, Location B

As exemplified by the above extract, teachers were the subject of particular criticism from parents, with poor teacher attendance, lack of care and inadequate supervision of children

forming part of what was seen as a wider disregard for children's learning within the government sector.

Complaints with respect to school quality were not restricted to parents who were accessing private schools. For example, one mother in Location C explained that she felt that there was a lack of care and adequate supervision from teachers at the government schools that her children attended, as well as a failure to connect pedagogical activities with children's learning:

> It happens often that students are sitting in one class and teachers in another; I mean they don't give enough attention to the children. All they do is to sip tea throughout the day in the staff room […] The children in the classroom need to concentrate. All that a teacher does is to write on the blackboard. Whether the children are able to understand the concepts or not, they don't care.

(Adena, mother of six, ages 6 to 15; government schools)
Interview, 26 January 2015, Location C

However, it is also important to note that not all parents who were interviewed were so critical of government schooling and drew distinctions between institutions. For example, several parents in Location A spoke favourably of the nearest Kendriya Vidyalaya (KV), which a small number of children from the community were attending, and drew explicit comparisons between this school and SDMC schools in the area.[7] Whilst these comparisons tended to be quite general (one father referred to the KV as of a higher 'standard'), some parents noted that the school was English medium but less costly than nearby private schools.

Another father, Krishnan, whose children were attending a private aided school in Delhi, also spoke favourably about what he saw as the better quality of government schooling available in Tamil Nadu, where he himself had attended school:

> A balance between sports and studies is struck, so that the kids do not get bored. They have long periods there. I mean kids get engaged in the activities at schools so much that they forget about any issues that their households may be facing, tensions and anything else at all about their households. He feels at home in school.

(Krishnan, father of three, ages 13 to 17; private aided school)
Interview, 12 February 2015, Location B

It is notable that the ways in which Krishnan characterises good education are focused not on learning outcomes, but the processes involved in producing these, namely, engaging children effectively in learning, the provision of extra-curricular activities and children feeling comfortable in the school environment. Thus, whilst Krishnan was not accessing government schooling for his children currently, his perspective does add nuance to the widespread discourses of failure surrounding government schooling.

With a similar focus on children's wellbeing, other parents who were accessing government schooling for one or more of their children tended to focus on effective communication with parents and the care of children in their accounts of quality within the government sector:

> They have the mobile numbers of all parents so there is no problem; they call us if there's a problem […] It often happens that the teacher calls in

> case the child is not feeling well or has been absent. So that makes us feel good that the teachers look after the children.

(Sandeepan, father of three, ages 1 to 11; private and government schools)
Interview, 26 February 2015, Location C

Thus, discussions of government schooling drew attention to a varied range of school quality indicators that were found to contribute to some parents' overall conceptions of good education, as well as the varied experiences of parents who were accessing government schooling for their children. At the same time, interview data reflected what other researchers have identified as the 'culturally hegemonic language around the failure of government schools' (Subrahmanian 2005: 69) and a perception of the superior quality of private schools, sometimes despite a lack of direct personal experience (Majumdar and Mooij 2011; Kaur 2017). For example:

> *[RA: What do you think is the difference between education in a government and a private school?]*
>
> There is a lot of difference in a private school. Private school is much better […] Private schools cannot be the way government schools are. We do want to educate our children, but we don't have the required money. We want to send them to private schools.

(Neeti, mother of two, ages 7 and 13; private aided school)
Interview, 10 December 2014, Location B

Parents drawing quality comparisons between government and private provision at a very broad level were common across interviews and suggested the function of management

type as a proxy indictor, associated closely with English. The (re)production of such discourses at the community level are explored in the following section.

3.3 'Hot' knowledge and government school failure

In the absence of formal information in the public arena in the form of league tables or exam results, informal networks were the primary source of most parents' information about schools in each area, with most describing speaking to their neighbours, relatives and in some cases employers for information and advice about schooling. For example:

> When it comes to their education, I speak to my elder brother and a friend, [name redacted]. There are two or three more friends whom I ask about good schools.
>
> (Varshil, father of two, ages 3 and 6; private school)
>
> Interview, 18 February 2015, Location C

Some parents who had attended school also drew on what they presented as their 'first-hand' knowledge to support their perspective of government school quality failings. For example:

> *[RA: Why and how have you come to feel that the level of education in government schools is so low?]*
>
> That's because we ourselves have studied in government schools. We exactly know what happens there. Teachers come to schools, they gossip around, someone is knitting a sweater, someone [pause] You must know

> it all [by now]. No one is concerned about kids' education, whether they are studying or not; no one bothers with that.
>
> (Rakesh, uncle of three, ages 11 to 15; private schools)
>
> Interview, 15 January 2015, Location B

The relationship between personal experience and quality perceptions illuminates one aspect of the relationship between parental biography and choice, with biography an important but often overlooked influence on parents' schooling decisions (Drury 1993). Equally, the above extract reveals how individual experiences may feed into a broader narrative of government school failures within communities. Rakesh does not present his school experience as isolated, for example, but as typical within the government sector.

Personal experience is also one aspect of what Ball and Vincent (1998) term 'hot' knowledge, or the unofficial information that is exchanged within informal social networks. In contrast to official, 'cold' knowledge, 'hot' knowledge includes emotional responses, rumour and gossip (Ball and Vincent 1998). In this way, the significance of hot knowledge to quality conceptions could also be identified in unsubstantiated narratives about schools that arose in interviews with parents. One mother's account of her reasons for choosing a local private school for her son, for example, captures some of the local gossip concerning safety failures at government schools:

> Students of government schools run away from there during half break […]
>
> I felt my child cannot even talk properly, he doesn't know how to speak to people, and if someone takes him away, what would I do.
>
> *[RA: So students run away from government schools?]*
>
> Yes, they do that during half break.
>
> *[RA: This problem exists in all government schools nearby?]*

> Yes, in all of them. Children scale these walls and run away.
>
> (Ridika, mother of one son, age 5; private school)
>
> Interview, 22 February 2015, Location B

To classify Ridika's account as gossip is not to conclude that children running away from schools at break time was not an issue in the area. However, such examples do draw attention to 'the power of the negative story, the destructive anecdote' (Ball and Vincent 1998: 379) in discourses surrounding government school quality.

In addition, researchers in other national contexts have identified that hot knowledge consists of information concerning the social composition of school spaces (Ball 2003; Kosunen, Carrasco and Tironi 2015). Whilst very few parents whom I interviewed referred to class or caste directly when discussing their children's schooling, comments concerning children's cleanliness and behaviour suggested an attentiveness to the social backgrounds of children attending different schools. For example:

> The children complained about the atmosphere of that school. The other boys there were dirty, and they didn't like it. They only stayed for two days; within two days, we realised that it was not good, so we went to [private school].
>
> (Kayaan, father of two, ages 12 and 15; private aided school)
>
> Interview, 11 January 2015, Location B

Discourse concerning the social composition of different schools may thus feed into broader 'discourses of derision' (Ball 1990) surrounding government schooling and, in turn, may contribute to parental conceptions of 'good' and 'bad' schooling options.[8] At the same time, the attempt that some parents made to draw distinctions between their own

children who were going to private schools and those accessing government schooling illuminate the significance of schooling for parents as a strategy of social differentiation (for further discussion of these issues see Gurney 2017).

3.4 Non-educational aims, indicators and schooling choices

In addition to social status perceptions and associated schooling decisions, other non-educational aims and associated indicators were found to play a role in shaping parents' schooling choices. In particular, the findings suggest that parents were influenced by their own social identities with respect to regional and religious affiliations. For example, a group of parents in Location B who had migrated to Delhi from Tamil Nadu described their rationale for enrolling their children at a Tamil medium, private aided school outside of the immediate locality in terms of pride in regional identity. As one father, Siddharth, explained:

> It is a Tamil school. They teach Tamil, Hindi and English there, which is good. I am Tamil and I am proud to send my children to a Tamil school.
>
> (Siddharth, father of four, ages 15 to 21; private-aided school)
>
> Interview, 10 November 2014, Location B

Later in the interview, Siddharth was also explicit about the comparative significance of quality indicators and social identity in relation to his choice of school:

> *[RA: Do you think it is a good school?]*

> Compared to others I think it is OK. But it is not a good education […] The principal is not good. There is no order there; children just sit around and do not work.
>
> (Siddharth)

Thus, learning outcomes and other educational aims were not necessarily the only factors that parents considered when making schooling choice for their children, nor was 'good' education with respect to quality indicators necessarily prioritised. This illustrates the social justice implications of the role of parents as proxy consumers in market spaces (as Winch notes in Chapter 2) by drawing attention to the various interests that contribute to parents' schooling choices beyond outcomes focused on the child in question.

In addition, the role of sociocultural factors in shaping choices was also apparent in gendered patterns of school enrolment. In addition to cost, which has been identified by other researchers as a meaningful issue with respect to school access for girls (Maitra, Pal and Sharma 2014), gendered conceptions of safety were also significant to parents' schooling choices. Whilst this was not the case across all households, single sex schools close to the family home tended to be prioritised for girls over all other choice criteria. Within the context of the study sites, this restricted options substantially both geographically and to government schools.

11.3.5 Quality compromises

A common assertion by many parents was that their ability to access quality schooling was dependent on financial resources. Almost every parent who was interviewed

referenced budget considerations as playing a role in shaping their decision-making processes and access to good or better quality schooling. For example:

> I don't dare to think about good schooling because I don't have the capacity to pay for it. I don't have the money, so why think about these schools and about sending them there? Why think about it?

(Sanjana, mother of one son, age 7; private school)
Interview, 19 November 2014, Location B

Moderating aspirations with respect to school quality was a common strategy adopted by parents in the face of significant disadvantages within the education market. Financial resources as the key determiner of the ability to access quality schooling was accepted as part of the status quo, with one father implying his perception of a direct relationship between cost and the quality of teaching and learning:

> No, their studies do not go well. Nor are they made to understand properly.
>
> In accordance with the fees, studies get done.

(Neel, father of three, ages 4 to 8; government and private schools)
Interview, 1 February 2015, Location C

Other parents also described quality compromises in non-academic aspects of school quality, such as a constructive relationship between teachers and parents. For example:

> *[RA: What do you get fined for?]*

> Well, one thing is if a boy urinates. Parents are called and asked to clean that. We are paying fees for cleaning, but are called when a small child has urinated. 'Your child has done something, you have to clean it.' This is humiliating for us. It makes me so angry! This is discriminating against us! It also happened to a relative of mine; they also called her about this.

(Minakshi, mother of one son, age 5; private school)

Interview, 19 November 2014, Location B

As is apparent from this extract, Minakshi was very angry at the discriminatory treatment that she felt that she and others in her family experienced from school authorities. Despite this, and examples she gave of the bullying her son experienced from teachers and other pupils, Minakshi continued to send her son to this particular school. Thus, a trade-off between wellbeing and learning outcomes was the quality compromise that Minakshi felt that she had to make in view of affordability constraints and what she perceived as the relatively better academic aspects of quality within the school.

In fact, very few parents reported having exited a school because of quality concerns or having raised complaints with school authorities or teachers. For example, Arjun, a father of two, describes why he felt reluctant to complain about his sons' private aided school:

> I did not go for making a complaint. When everyone is facing this problem, then why should it be just us who complain about it? A meeting would be conducted, and he [the teacher] would lose his job. So we did not go for complaining. It's a government school, not a private one that is taking charges for educating the kids. Had it been, we could have said something.

> We don't have to pay money in government schools. Education is free there. They would say, are you paying anything? This is what we would get to hear.

(Arjun, father of two sons, ages 15 and 10; private aided school) [9]

Interview, 10 November 2014, Location B

However, whilst in the above extract, Arjun suggests that he would have felt able to raise a complaint in a private school because the payment of fees would lend greater consumer power, this was not borne out in reports from parents who were accessing private schooling. For example, Minakshi, despite her unhappiness with significant aspects of her son's schooling, characterised the parent–teacher association (PTA) meetings as one-sided with apparently little, if any, constructive discussion between parents and teachers:

> *[RA: Do you have any PTA meetings or a time when you can speak to teachers?]*
>
> We are called to school for the parent-teacher meetings, but only the teachers speak, you just keep silent. We are only called to pay a fine or to correct bad behaviour.
>
> (Minakshi)

Thus, the response of parents to poor quality was not necessarily voice or exit. Loyalty to the school itself does not seem to explain the actions of Minakshi or Arjun, for example, who chose to keep their children in their current schools despite serious quality concerns. Nor does it seem adequate to label either parent an 'inert client' (Hirschman 1970), as both were quality conscious but had made the deliberate decision to remain. Instead, I

want to suggest that Bourdieu's concept of habitus may be useful in illuminating the apparent resignation to poor quality provision that several parents expressed.

Bourdieu (1977) loosely defines habitus as the set of dispositions that 'produces practices in accordance with the schemes engendered by history' (p. 82). By emphasising the active role of the social agent in the construction and navigation of social reality (Strand, 2001), Bourdieu (1977) proposes habitus as 'the strategy generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations' (p. 72). For parents who participated in the current study, the moderation of quality expectations within heavily constrained circumstances may thus be understood as a rejection of higher quality options that anyway are not available to them:

> The most improbable practices are therefore excluded, as unthinkable, by a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, that is, to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable.
>
> (Bourdieu 1990: 54)

Therefore, schools regarded as better quality were considered impossible to access and were excluded from the choice landscape, with a complaint resulting in effective change regarded as equally unlikely and unachievable.

11.3.6 Gaining access: Resource leverage

Lack of available funds and budget restrictions are, of course, a clear barrier to acquiring goods in any market setting. However, the bureaucratic systems that parents encountered in school spaces that were not of their own design could operate as barriers to school access. Power dynamics in the form of hierarchies between school staff and parents also constrained parents' ability to adopt consumer behaviours within the education market.

For example, a few other parents were apparently trapped in a complicated cycle of school admission 'lucky draws', illuminating the distinction between making a choice and actually gaining access to a desired school:

> *[RA: Why did you choose [private school] for your son? Why did you admit him there?]*
>
> Rajiv: Actually, we filled forms at two to three schools. But our number did not turn up there.
>
> […]
>
> Mishka: He was not getting admission anywhere, so we had to admit him in this school.
>
> Rajiv: We tried in a number of schools! But nothing worked out.
>
> […]
>
> Rajiv: We can't take the chance of sending him here till Class V, because then his number may not come in other schools. So, we are thinking of admitting him to some other school this year itself, in Class III.
>
> *[RA: Do you have any school in your mind, where you would like to admit him?]*
>
> Mishka: We will fill forms in two to three schools this time around.

(Rajiv and Mishka, parents of three children, ages 1 to 8; private school)

Interview, 6 December, 2014, Location A

The bureaucratic challenges involved for parents in entering such 'lucky draws' or other admission procedures should not be underestimated; requirements such as a birth certificate, or legal affidavits, and English language admission forms not only necessitated additional expense and time, but also some administrative 'know-how'. This was also true for parents who ventured into private school spaces, where the admission process was also often described as frustrating, characterised by compromise rather than the exercise and empowerment of choice:

> This was not our first choice. I had visited [higher-fee private school] at first, which is located in [name redacted]. But they refused admission. They wanted recommendations, [an] approach and other things too. We did not have any choice.

(Garima, mother of one son, age 8; private school)

Interview, 15 February 2015, Location B

Such accounts illuminate not only the emotionally stressful nature of the admissions process for many parents but also the general perception that both financial resources *and* social contacts were a requirement to gain admission to 'good' schools, even when parents were in theory able to pay the fee or were exempt through the RTE Act.

Indeed, the findings indicate that families with 'know-how' or other forms of capital were better able to utilise specific strategies for gaining admission to desirable schools, including through the RTE Act 25% reservation. Indeed, simply knowing about

the reservation should be understood as a considerable advantage within the market, given that most parents who were interviewed were not aware of the reservation, although some expressed a general awareness of government schemes to support school access.

Across the data set, five of the 58 households interviewed were identified as having gained access to a school under the 25% reservation (three in Location A and two in Location B). However, it was notable that three of these households described receiving some additional 'assistance' in this process, typically through a social contact who could enable parents to bypass regular admission procedures. For example:

> *[RA: And how did you get admission for him at [name of school]?]*
>
> I have a contact with a member of parliament of New Delhi, and I asked him to help me get admission. He did not help me. I also know the driver of [government official] who has admitted his child in [name of school], and he helped me.
>
> *[RA: So was there a lottery or anything like that for admissions?]*
>
> No lottery, there was an interview with the principal, and then he was admitted.

(Sachin, father of one son, age 9; selective government school)

Interview, 16 November 2014, Location A

The school that Sachin refers to is one of the schools that Rajiv and Mishka had tried and failed to secure access to through the admission lottery and were planning to do so again in the next round. This illustrates the significance of social capital in facilitating school admission and the strategic use of such capital by some parents, as well as illuminating the variation in experience between different parents. In addition, admission under the

reservation did not in all cases result in free education as per the terms of the RTE Act; two of the five households reported paying additional fees for school expenses, making similar schooling choices unaffordable for other parents from across the study sites (see Srivastava and Noronha 2016, and Mehendale, Mukhopadhyay and Namala 2015 for discussion of similar issues with respect to the implementation of the RTE Act).

One father (Ritvik) also acknowledged explicitly that he had used false documents, organised through a work contact, to gain admission for his younger daughter at a local private school in Location B under the 25% reservation. This was only disclosed at the end of what was a long interview, perhaps when Ritvik felt more comfortable in sharing this sensitive information when trust had been established between us. However, despite having essentially benefitted from being able to use economic capital to secure school admission by a 'back door' route, Ritvik still felt unhappy about what he perceived as the unfair treatment his family had received when seeking admission at other schools in the nearby area:

> You take admission in four or five schools, and then they release the wait list, [but] we don't get to know about it.
>
> *[RA: Did you speak to anyone when you went for admissions that you could ask about this?]*
>
> You don't see a face! You just get the form and go.
>
> (Ritvik, two children, ages 6 and 8; private and private aided schools)
>
> Interview, 23 November 2014, Location B

Ritvik's assertion that school admission could only be secured through payment may be partly to justify his own decision to pay for false documents, framing this decision as a

reasonable course of action within a market context where financial resources are definitive. The frustration that some parents felt over the lack of transparency of school admissions may thus result in parents deciding to subvert prescribed procedures through the justification of necessity.

4. Conclusion

Within this chapter, I have tried to capture some of the diversity in parents' conceptions and experiences of education and school quality that was evident within the wider data set. Regarding overall conceptions of school quality, communication with parents, appropriate supervision, and effective teaching and learning were all aspects that parents cited during interviews. However, parent perceptions of the education landscape were found to be shaped by two dominant ideas: the poor quality of government schooling and the desirability of English medium, private schools. In the former, widespread discourses of derision surrounding government schooling were found to circulate through informal information sharing networks that took the form of personal experiences, rumour and gossip. In the latter, desirability of English may be understood as a response to labour market demand, as well as a reflection of associations between English, fee-paying schools and broader social advantages. Nevertheless, despite narratives of government school failure, it is also important to recognise nuances that were noted between government schools, as well as more positive accounts of government school quality.

In addition, very few parents expressed satisfaction with the school that their children were attending currently, and even fewer described having exercised either voice or exit in response to quality concerns within a specific school (as opposed to the decision

to reject the government sector entirely). Parents who stayed in what they perceived as poorly performing schools were not inattentive to school failures, but described moderating their quality expectations and aspirations in view of structural constraints. Together with the function of non-educational aims in shaping school selection identified in the findings, for example in relation to gender, such quality compromises illuminate some of the social justice implications associated with the role of parents as proxy consumers within the education market. The findings thus point both to the complexity in seeking to define quality from the perspective of parents and how 'choice' as a policy mechanism for quality improvement may be problematic in practice.

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[1] Exceptions include Srivastava (2008), who explores school choice amongst households accessing two low-fee private schools in Uttar Pradesh; Hill, Samson and Dasgupta (2011), who detail the dynamics of school choice in one village in Rajasthan; and James and Woodhead (2014), who focus on the decision-making processes of frequent school movers within a broader, longitudinal study into children's lives in Andhra Pradesh.

[2] This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under Grant ES/J500057/1.

[3] The number and location of schools in each area was developed through household interviews, field observations, District Information System for Education (DISE) data and secondary household survey data accessed via a Delhi-based NGO.

[4] Other languages spoken by interviewees during interviews were Bhojpuri, English and Tamil.

[5] Note that all names used throughout are pseudonyms.

[6] Aishi's daughter was attending a Hindi medium government school. Her son attended an English medium private school.

[7] Two parents with a child attending this school were interviewed as part of the current study. Both were attending the school under the 25% reservation, as stipulated in the Right to Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act). However, other parents in the area also discussed the school and its perceived quality at some length in interviews.

[8] See Hill, Samson and Dasgupta (2011) and Kaur (2017), who also identify the significance of caste to parents' schooling decisions.

[9] Whilst not free, the fees at this private-aided school were minimal (reported as Rs. 150 per annum). All parents who were accessing the school referred to it as a government school in interviews.